

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 370

CS 206 443

AUTHOR Sebesta, Sam L.: And Others
 TITLE Story Structures in Children's Book Choices.
 PUB DATE Apr 81
 NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on Language Arts in the Elementary School (13th, Portland, OR, April 10-12, 1981).
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Books; *Childrens Literature; Fiction; Intermediate Grades; Literary Devices; *Reading Interests; Reading Materials; *Reading Material Selection; *Reading Research
 IDENTIFIERS *Story Structure

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to discover the components of books that children prefer over and above those children's books that adults critically acclaim. Forty intermediate-level fiction books included in the "Children's Choices" listings for 1978 to 1980 were read by three adult researchers and classified according to A. Applebee's taxonomy of story structures. The six basic story structure categories devised by Applebee include two plot concepts and two story structures. The random sampling indicated that children did choose all types of story structures, and that the greatest proportion of their choices fell into categories that included a focus. Focused chains and true narratives, in which events are arranged in cause-effect patterns, comprised 50% of the sample. The results indicated that no single story structure can be designated as an exclusive favorite, although most choices include a focus and connected sequence of events. Children and young people seem to respect an author's integrity. Variety and integrity in story structure, rather than adherence to the critically approved true narrative might guide adults in selecting literature, including choices in basal readers and supplementary literature texts, for children. (HTH)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

+ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official NIE
position or policy.

STORY STRUCTURES IN CHILDREN'S BOOK CHOICES
Sam L. Sebesta, James Calder, Lynne Nelson Cleland
University of Washington

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sam L. Sebesta

James Calder

Lynne Nelson Cleland

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED203370

CS206443

STORY STRUCTURES IN CHILDREN'S BOOK CHOICES

Sam L. Sebesta, James Calder, Lynne Nelson Cleland

University of Washington

It happens frequently: critics, reading teachers, and other concerned adults like one children's book and children like another. All are aware of the need to match the book to the child. Studies of children's interests abound to help us make that match. Still, there seems to be a mismatch, and we are not sure why.

Why, for instance, do young readers who purportedly like horse stories embrace one horse epic that adults find distasteful, yet ignore a critical success on the same topic? There are variables in interest beyond topic and acknowledged literary components.

We sought information about one of those variables--story structure. We applied Arthur N. Applebee's story structure classifications (Applebee, 1978) to a large selection of books chosen by intermediate grade children as their favorites. We hoped to find a pattern in their choices, based on a preference for a certain type of story structure. The results, we believe, will be useful to writers, book buyers, and reading teachers who guide children's reading--as well as to critics themselves.

Procedure

We obtained at least two copies of 40 intermediate-level fiction books whose popularity was assured by inclusion in the "Children's Choices"

listings for the years 1978 to 1980. (See October 1980 Reading Teacher for details on how the lists were developed from books nationally tested.) The three of us read each book and independently classified it according to the Applebee taxonomy of story structures.

Initially, we disagreed on classifications, but practice on a group of "pilot" books revealed the main sources of disagreement: our tendency to classify a book high on the structure instrument if we liked it, and our difficulty in locating an implied focus that became apparent only after close reading. Our practice improved reliability. We achieved unanimous agreement on the classification of 34 of the 40 books while, on the other six, we accepted majority opinion.

Description of the Applebee Instrument

The six basic story structure categories devised by Applebee are described in Table 1. Applebee originally developed these through analysis of stories told by children, in order to determine possible levels of literary development. We decided to use these structures and apply them to fiction written by professional authors.

Two plot concepts, focus and event, are the basic ingredients. The focus is the center of the story: a character, a setting, or a theme. In Jean Tolle's The Great Pete Penney, for example, the focus is Pete herself. The story's events describe Pete's efforts to compete on a male-dominated baseball team. A thematic focus is apparent in The Swing by

Emily Hanlon, in which a deaf girl must overcome the prejudice of her small community. While the central character is the physical force of the story, a more important focus--the realization that survival depends on being assertive in the face of ignorance--develops from the forward thrust of the story.

Insert Table 1 about here

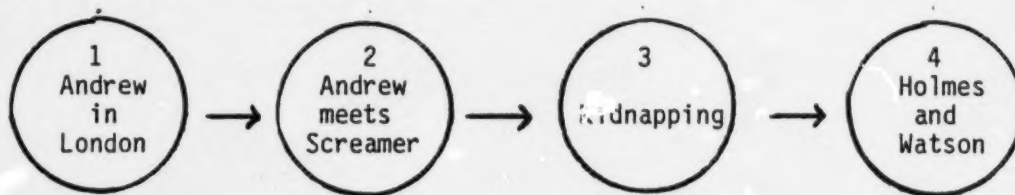
Two of the story structures--heaps and unfocused chain--lack a consistent focus. In these, the events become more important than the concept of focus. In the other four categories, focus is central.

Applying the Instrument: Two Examples

We believe that Robert Newman's The Case of the Baker Street Irregular is an example of an unfocused chain. Event 1: Andrew, not knowing a soul, arrives in London to meet his caretaker, Mr. Dennison. Event 2: After being settled into the boarding house, Andrew ventures into the neighborhood and meets Screamer. Event 3: When Andrew returns home, he observes two men kidnapping Mr. Dennison. Event 4: Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson discuss some strange incidents taking place in the city.

The story continues with each event leading into the next until the final chapter, where the masterful Holmes ties everything together. There

is not a consistent focus, since the action shifts from Andrew to Mr. Holmes to Mr. Lucas and back again to Andrew. In this case, it is the events, not the characters, that are being developed through the forward thrust of this mystery adventure. Taking a group of seemingly random events, the author establishes connections among the incidents so that they are joined together and lead the reader to an understandable conclusion.



We believe that Lois Lowery's A Summer to Die can be classified as a true narrative. The thematic focus is Meg's transformation from insecure girl to beautiful young woman, as result of the death of her sister Molly. The transformation is accomplished through a series of events growing out of the focus, with each event leading causally to the next.

Findings

With N=40, the categorization of books used in the sample is reported in Table 2. This random sampling of children's choices at the intermediate-grade level indicates that children do choose all types of story structures. The greatest proportion of their choices (77.5%) falls into categories that include a focus. Focused chains and true narratives, in which events are arranged in cause-effect patterns, comprise 50% of the sample. One-fourth of the selections are categorized as true narrative:

that is, they contain closure with cause-effect patterned events growing out of a thematic focus. However, almost one-fourth (22.5%) of the choices have no focus and are classified as heaps or unfocused chains.

Insert Table 2 about here

Implications

Our results indicate that children do not rule out any of the six story structures when selecting books they like. No single story structure can be designated as an exclusive favorite, although most choices include a focus and a connected sequence of events. Examining preferred selections, we found that children and young people seem to respect an author's integrity. If a story does not fit the true narrative structure, they may still accept it. They do not give preference to works whose authors seem to force closure. Variety and integrity in story structure, rather than adherence to the critically approved true narrative, might guide us in selecting literature, including choices in basal readers and supplementary literature texts.

Although used in the original study as a means for examining children's original stories, the Applebee instrument can be successfully applied to fiction written by professional authors. Our interaction based on the Applebee categories reveals that it can enhance literary experience. We believe that the Applebee categories for plot structure helped

us deal with focus, with main events, their connections, and the relationship to the focus. We believe, on the basis of this experience, that the instrument has implications for teaching literary appreciation and comprehension to children and young people. In fact, our next attempt will be to implement the Applebee instrument in the classroom. Research such as that of Grundin et al. (1978) and Aoki (1978) indicates that global statements about stories and holistic activities based on literature should replace instruction dealing exclusively with separate comprehension factors. The Applebee instrument, together with our findings here, may be a step in that direction.

Table 1
The Applebee Instrument: Story Structures

1. Heaps:
no focus; random events
2. Sequences:
concrete focus; events flow out of the focus; events do not lead from one to the other
3. Primitive Narrative:
concrete focus; events grow out of the focus and lead to consequences for the focus; events do not lead from one to the other
4. Unfocused Chain:
no consistent focus; each event leads into the next; the order of events cannot be changed
5. Focused Chain:
concrete focus; events grow out of the focus; each event leads into the next; the order of events cannot be changed
6. True Narrative:
thematic focus; events grow out of the focus and lead to consequences for the focus; each event leads into the next; the order of events cannot be changed; closure occurs in the final stage of the story

Table 2
Story Structures Applied to Classroom Choices, N=40

HEAPS - 5%

DOES ANYONE CARE ABOUT LOU EMMA MILLER? Alberta Wilson Constant,
Crowell, 1979
I AM THE CHEESE, Robert Cormier, Pantheon, 1977

SEQUENCES - 15%

BETSY'S PLAY SCHOOL, Carolyn Haywood, Morrow, 1977
CIDER DAYS, Mary Stolz, Harper and Row, 1978
A HORSE FOR X.Y.Z. Louise Moeri, Dutton, 1977
LUDELL AND WILLIE, Brenda Wilkinson, Harper and Row, 1977
REFUGEE, Anne Rose, Dial, 1977
SUMMER STORM, June L. Shore, Abingdon, 1977

PRIMITIVE NARRATIVE - 12.5%

GHOST OF SUMMER, Eve Bunting, Warne, 1977
GHOSTS I HAVE BEEN, Richard Peck, Viking, 1977
THE GIRL WHO HAD NO NAME, Berniece Rabe, Dutton, 1977
IT CAN'T HURT FOREVER, Marilyn Singer, Harper and Row, 1978
THE MARIAH DELANEY LENDING LIBRARY DISASTER, Sheila Greenwald,
Houghton, 1977

UNFOCUSED CHAIN - 17.5%

ABSOLUTE ZERO, Helen Cresswell, Avon, 1979
BUNNICULA: A RABBIT TALE OF MYSTERY, Deborah Howe and James Howe,
Atheneum, 1979
THE CASE OF THE BAKER STREET IRREGULAR, Robert Newman, Atheneum, 1978
FOLLOW THAT BUS! Pat Hutchins, Greenwillow, 1977
KONRAD, Christine Nostlinger, Watts, 1977
THE LUCK OF BRIN'S FIVE, Cherry Wilder, Atheneum, 1977
YOUR OLD PAL, AL, Constance G. Greene, Viking, 1979

Table 2 (continued)

FOCUSED Chain - 25%

ALAN MENDELSON, THE BOY FROM MARS, Daniel M. Pinkwater, Dutton, 1979
 ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD, Bill Brittain, Harper and Row, 1979
 CINNAMON CANE, Melinda Pollowitz, Harper and Row, 1977
 FROZEN FIRE, James Houston, Atheneum, 1977
 THE GREAT PETE PENNEY, Jean B. Tolle, Atheneum, 1979
 WE INTERRUPT THIS SEMESTER FOR AN IMPORTANT BULLETIN, Ellen Conford,
 Little, 1979
 AN ORPHAN FOR NEBRASKA, Charlene Joy Talbot, Atheneum, 1979
 RAMONA AND HER FATHER, Beverly Cleary, Morrow, 1977
 SPROUT AND THE DOGSITTER, Jennifer Wayne, McGraw, 1977
 SUMMER OF THE STALLION, June A. Hanson, MacMillan, 1979

TRUE NARRATIVE - 25%

ALAN AND THE ANIMAL KINGDOM, Isabelle Holland, Lippincott, 1979
 BARGAIN BRIDE, Evelyn S. Lampman, Atheneum, 1977
 CAN YOU SUE YOUR PARENTS FOR MALPRACTICE? Paula Danziger, Delacorte,
 1979
 DOGSBODY, Diana W. Jones, Dell, 1979
 THE HAUNTING OF JULIE UNGER, Valerie A. Lutters, Atheneum, 1977
 I GOTTA BE FREE, Ruth Haliman, Westminster, 1977
 A SUMMER IN THE SOUTH, James Marshall, Houghton Mifflin, 1977
 A SUMMER TO DIE, Louis Lowry, Houghton Mifflin, 1977
 THE SWING, Emily Harlan, Bradbury Press, 1979
 THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF TERRIBLE, Peggy Mann, Doubleday, 1977

References

- Aoki, Elaine Mei. The Effects of Active Student-Initiated Responses on Literal and Non-Literal Reading Comprehension and Attitudes Toward Reading of Third-Grade Students. University of Washington, 1978. Unpublished dissertation.
- Applebee, Arthur N. The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen. The University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Grundin, Hans U., Brother Leonard Courtney, Judith Langer, Robert Pehrsson, H. Alan Robinson, and Takahiko Sakamoto. "Cloze Procedure and Comprehension: An Exploratory Study Across Three Languages," in Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Reading Research, ed. Dina Feitelson. International Reading Association, pp. 48-61, 1978.
- "Children's Choices for 1978." The Reading Teacher, (October 1978), pp. 28-46.
- "Children's Choices for 1979." The Reading Teacher, (October, 1979), pp. 33-52.
- "Children's Choices for 1980." The Reading Teacher, (October, 1980), pp. 37-56.